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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 NDJAMENA 001205

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SUBJECT: CHAD: MORE TROUBLES AHEAD

Classified By: Ambassador Marc Wall for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: The respite President Deby enjoyed after his inauguration on August 8 for another five-year term in power did not last long. Last month he had to intervene personally in campaigns to rout out Chadian rebel forces from their strongholds in eastern Chad. The failure of his offensive against the group of his predominantly Zaghawa clansmen forced on Deby the realization that he cannot count on his army or his own family to win a military victory. Backing out of his attack mode, he is now in N'Djamena scrambling to negotiate side deals with the various rebel factions. No one can count Deby out, but he is clearly in trouble. More clashes in eastern Chad are almost inevitable after Ramadan and the end of the rainy season later this month. Renewed fighting will impede our efforts to support humanitarian relief operations, counter-terrorist cooperation, responsible oil revenue management, and democratic change. Depending on how events unfold, we will need to take additional steps to discourage violence as well as examine the security posture of this mission. END SUMMARY

¶2. (SBU) On September 23 President Idriss Deby Itno returned unceremoniously to N'Djamena after two weeks in eastern Chad. He had arrived in Abeche after abruptly curtailing his visit to Paris and stopping briefly in Libya. His return was hastened by the launch of an offensive by the Chadian army September 10 on a rebel stronghold in Aramkolle, a desolate stretch of boulders and grottos between Biltine and Guerda. The rebels had arrived in previous days riding on horses and camels and pulling carts loaded with weapons. They had been pushed out of their camps across the border in Sudan following the agreement between the two countries to withdraw support for their opposing rebel groups. Led by Mahamat Nour and drawn largely from the Tama, Ouaddaian, and Chadian Arab ethnic groups, the force was already weakened by leadership struggles and internecine fighting. In fierce, close-quarters combat, the Chadian army subdued them, but not without filling morgues and hospitals in N'Djamena and Abeche with hundreds of casualties from both sides. Those not still holding out in the rocks reportedly made their way back across the border.

Hadjer Marfaine and Its Aftermath

13. (C) Emboldened by this victory, Deby initiated an attack September 19 against another Chadian rebel group in the mountainous region of Hadjer Marfaine on the border with Sudan north of Adre. This group consisted largely of fighters from Deby's own Zaghawa clan led by Timan Erdimi, a senior family member and former Deby confidant. In this attack, Deby badly miscalculated. His troops were reluctant to fight, fearing the vendettas unleashed when the blood of fellow clansmen is shed. But Deby also did not anticipate how well informed the defenders would be about his own troop movements. Timan Erdimi and his commanders were in regular contact by satellite phones with Deby's family members and army officers. The information they received enabled them to stage a devastating ambush of Deby's forces. No longer able to count on his army and believing another such set-back could result in the collapse of his regime, Deby stationed his troops in defensive positions on the main approaches to Hadjer Marfaine and decamped for N'Djamena.

14. (C) Back in the capital, Deby shifted into his Plan B. On the one hand, he has been transporting planeloads of supplies to eastern Chad and considering plans for an attack in early November on Chadian rebel base camps in Sudan. On the other, he has been pursuing every angle he can think of to reconcile with -- or at least neutralize -- any one of the various rebel factions opposing him. His aim is to exploit their inability to join forces, perhaps the strongest advantage he now has in his arsenal of survival tricks.

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Scenarios

15. (C) These groups are working hard to overcome this handicap, allegedly still with Khartoum's active support. One possible formation would be a coalition between former Defense Minister Mahamat Nouri's Goran-based forces, now reportedly based near Modeina, and the various Zaghawa factions. The appointment of Adoum Togoi, a Zaghawan Borogat and a long-exiled rebel leader with close ties to Mouammar Qadhafi, to lead a group under Seby Aguid, another key Deby family member who defected earlier this year, is seen as a step that could lead to such an understanding. Another alliance could emerge from the recruitment of the Ouaddaian forces left leaderless by the crack-up of Mahamat Nour's coalition into a force aligned with Timan Erdimi's Zaghawa elements. Either could constitute a military block that could tip the balance against Deby's army.

16. (C) Deby's survival hinges on whether his adversaries can come together before he succeeds in cutting side deals with them. Deby has proved many times his mastery not only of desert warfare but also of such inter-tribal scheming. He has it in him to pull it off again. On the other hand, his support within his family and his army has rarely appeared so tenuous. Now more than ever, he knows he can trust no one. If any combination of the factions opposing him can come to terms, it could set the stage for a rebel attack on Abeche, the key town in eastern Chad. As was the case after Deby's successful advance against Hissein Habre in 1990, its fall would presage the end of his regime.

17. (C) Alternatively, Deby's inner circle, tired of shedding so much Itno blood in his defense, could decide it was time to arrange for his ouster, perhaps by assassination. The French here take seriously another worrisome scenario: Deby may be contemplating organizing a core group of loyalists into a new fighting force, abandoning N'Djamena for the vast spaces of eastern Chad, and living off provisions the French suspect he has stashed somewhere in the region.

Key unknowns include the extent of the future involvement of Sudan and France, both of whom are backing the opposing sides with logistical and medical help and may be prepared to provide more robust assistance.

Our Interests and Approach

18. (C) The situation remains stable at this stage, but has the potential to deteriorate abruptly, particularly as the rains taper off in the next few weeks and overland movements become feasible again. While the events at Aramkolle and Hadjer Marfaine have not hurt the humanitarian relief operation in eastern Chad so far, more such violence could make it harder to sustain. A downturn would also complicate efforts to pursue the option of installing U.S. or other international personnel in eastern Chad. More fighting in that region and uncertainties about the regime's prospects in N'Djamena would undermine anti-terrorist cooperation and make Deby less inclined to use oil revenues responsibly. There is an outside chance that Deby may be more open now to our proposals for political reform, if he concludes they could form the basis of a deal with his adversaries. More likely is that he will slip back into his old habits of intrigue, intimidation, and pay-offs that have enabled him to survive for so long.

19. (C) Our approach should continue to be the one outlined in the Secretary's letter, i.e., press for political and economic reform and a commitment to a peaceful transition. We also need to prepare for more disruptive scenarios. We should work with the French, the EU, the AU, and other

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partners to denounce any Sudanese and Chadian support for violence on their border and to push for reconciliation among the adversaries within Chad. In the meantime, we will be examining our security posture to assure it is appropriate in the current circumstances.

WALL